

VZCZCXRO8659
RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #4180/01 1100711
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 200711Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4486
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 004180

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: PUBLIC CHAMBER GETS INTO GEAR

REF: A. MOSCOW 922
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 1082

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (B/D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. In the three months since its inaugural plenary, the Public Chamber has displayed a flurry of activity. Its many commissions, sub-commissions and working groups have begun a busy schedule of meetings on a broad range of issues. Early tensions with the State Duma and other bodies have been resolved, or at least put aside. Chamber members with whom we spoke remain uncertain that the Chamber will ultimately have much impact, but they professed commitments to trying to use it to affect change. Lawyer Genri Reznik, one of its most independent members, recently told the Ambassador that the Chamber could play a positive role in promoting legal reform, but added that if the body proved to be nothing but a rubber-stamp, he and like-minded members would walk away. We remain skeptical of the Chamber's overall impact but are exploring opportunities to influence specific policies and help shape elite attitudes. END SUMMARY.

Chamber Swings into Action

[1](#)2. (C) After a shaky start in the immediate aftermath of its first formal meeting on January 22 (ref A), Russia's Public Chamber has swung into gear. Perhaps its most visible initial attempt to establish its credibility came when it investigated the Chelyabinsk hazing incident (ref B). The press widely covered Chamber Commission on Public Control over Law Enforcement Activities Chair Anatoliy Kucherena's trips to Chelyabinsk and meetings with key players in that incident. Most observers agree that the investigation raised the Chamber's profile and marginally improved its public image.

[1](#)3. (C) Particularly in the period since then, the Chamber's seventeen commissions and the many recently formed sub-commissions and working groups have met regularly and frequently. Their focus has run the gamut from issues of high policy -- including some major foreign policy issues being addressed by the Commission on Foreign Cooperation and Public Diplomacy, chaired by political analyst Vyacheslav Nikonov -- to more narrow concerns, such as one commission's April 12 session to discuss the quality of music education in Russia. Setting out an ambitious agenda that includes improving Russia's image abroad and working with foreign NGOs operating in Moscow, Nikonov has told us he will organize meetings under the umbrella of the Chamber with foreign experts on international affairs. It had already co-hosted (with Gleb Pavlovskiy's Center for Effective Politics) an experts meeting with the Nixon Center, and had also hosted a meeting a meeting of experts from Shanghai Cooperation Organization countries. He noted that the Chamber plenary has usefully highlighted the issue of tolerance in the face of repeated attacks on ethnic minorities, and he predicted

the Chamber would also look at the controversial Baikal pipeline issue.

14. (SBU) Among the bodies formed within the Chamber has been an "expert analytical group" that will work on citizens' electoral rights. Created at the initiative of the Free Elections Foundation, the analytical group includes a range of experts including Golos head Liliya Shibanova. While continuing to work with Golos, the Embassy's USAID mission has begun exploring the possibility to working with the newly formed organization.

15. (C) Several members have told us they are more busy with Chamber work than they had expected. Russian Union of Youth Chairman Oleg Rozhnov said the pace of Chamber work is making it hard to keep up with his other responsibilities. We heard from terrorism expert Aleksandr Ignatenko that the Commission on Development of Civil Society and Public Assistance to National Projects, of which he is deputy chair, had received a flood of proposals, and dealing with them was proving a huge challenge. The Chamber's small staff of ninety people was not proving sufficient, Ignatenko said, and while the Chamber could call in many experts, doing so required more time and organizational capacity than he had at his disposal. Nikonov also commented on what he regarded as a largely "useless" staff that showed more initial interest in the perquisites of office than in supporting Chamber activities.

16. (C) Even before the Chamber formally began its work, evidence emerged that it had evoked unhappiness from the State Duma, which saw the new body as challenging its legislative responsibilities. In that context, many observers believed that Chamber members' attempts to forestall passage of the controversial NGO law until the

MOSCOW 00004180 002 OF 003

Chamber, ostensibly representing civil society views, could fully consider it reflected a struggle between the two bodies. After paying lip service to Chamber input, the Duma passed the legislation and President Putin signed it before the Chamber's first plenary session. Subsequently, the Duma sought to limit Chamber members' ability to enter the Duma building and to attend Duma sessions. By some accounts, the Kremlin was forced to step in and broker a compromise to end the embarrassing controversy, which drew media attention. At the time, Ignatenko confirmed to us that the controversy was real, with Duma members seeing the Chamber as a threat to its authority. He added, however, that other bodies also felt threatened, claiming that Presidential Commission on Civil Society chair Ella Pamfilova was extremely unhappy with the Chamber, both because it threatened her Commission's responsibilities and because she had hoped to be appointed as its head.

17. (C) By all appearances, the Chamber's disputes with the Duma and other bodies have at least been put aside. In a recent interview, Chamber Secretary Yevgeniy Velikhov described relations between the two bodies as good, and the Duma and Chamber have begun holding joint meetings. Similarly, on April 12 the Chamber held a joint meeting with Prime Minister Fradkov and other government figures at which it was agreed that the Chamber would monitor implementation of the national priority projects, provide feedback on the public's views, and keep a lookout for bureaucratic hindrances that it could publicize and thus help overcome.

18. (C) That Velikhov heads the Chamber is itself cause for encouragement. A widely respected figure, he has long worked closely with the Embassy on a range of issues. Among those has been his active role in promoting the USAID-funded Junior Achievement Russia (JAR) program. Most recently, Velikhov proposed to the Ambassador that JAR be showcased as a positive example of how foreign-funded NGOs help Russia, and he suggested a Junior Achievement-related event as part of the Russian G-8 Presidency to highlight business-oriented youth in all the G-8 countries and Africa. Velikhov has

volunteered to put the Embassy in touch with various Chamber commission chairs with an eye to finding areas of cooperation. Nikonov told us he will accompany Velikhov on a visit to Washington in mid-May to an academic conference, and they will be interested in meetings in Congress and with Administration officials.

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ANY REAL IMPACT?

¶9. (C) Though the Chamber is now in motion, its members continue to have mixed views about whether it will have any real impact. Protestant Bishop Sergey Ryakhovskiy has noted to us that he will be closely involved with the Chamber's effort to monitor implementation of the NGO legislation, and he told us April 14 that he was encouraged by that day's discussion of xenophobia issues at a Chamber plenary. He acknowledged, however, that the Kremlin would continue to oversee the Chamber's workings and might not allow an independent analysis of whether NGOs were being treated fairly once the new legislation goes into effect. Nonetheless, Ryakhovskiy has insisted that he aims to make the most of the opportunity.

¶10. (C) In a recent meeting with the Ambassador, lawyer Genri Reznik, widely considered one of the Chamber's most independent members, made the same point about trying to use the Chamber to promote positive change. Noting that the Chamber had been formed to represent civil society, Reznik insisted that he became a member to represent his own views, which are shared by only a limited part of the Russian public. He intended to use the Chamber to support Putin on some issues, such as economic reform, while criticizing him on others.

¶11. (C) Reznik said he aimed to use the Chamber primarily to promote judicial reform. Corruption remained a serious problem in the judiciary, Reznik continued, being particularly rampant in the Arbitration Court. Ensuring that all court decisions are made readily available on the Internet would be one way to foster transparency, and the Chamber should encourage that effort. The media could also play an important role by reporting on corrupt judges, Reznik continued, pointing to a weekly column recently initiated in the Vedemosti newspaper to report on cases where the court ruled in favor of individuals and against large corporations or government bureaucrats. The Chamber could encourage other publications to replicate that initiative. The Procuracy's practice of undertaking a general investigation (obshchiy nadzor) of a company without objective reasons to suspect wrongdoing helped foster corruption, and the Chamber, working with the business sector, would study ways of ending that

MOSCOW 00004180 003.2 OF 003

practice. Most of Russia's judges hail from the ranks of prosecutors and law enforcers and are not progressives, Reznik added; he planned to use the Chamber to look for ways of getting more defense attorneys appointed as judges.

¶12. (C) While hopeful that the Chamber could make progress on those fronts, Reznik was uncertain about the prospects. He noted, however, that the Chamber's members included a significant number of honest and well-meaning people. If such people found the Chamber to be a rubber stamp, he insisted, they would quit rather than ruin their own reputations.

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THE VIEW OF SKEPTICS

¶13. (C) Many independent civil society activists are far more skeptical than Reznik. Acknowledging that the Chamber has members -- Reznik is usually mentioned -- who are genuinely independent, the skeptics fear that such people will not be able to have any positive impact and will quickly be co-opted.

¶14. (C) Not all believe the Chamber should be written off, however, Union of Right Forces (SPS) leader Leonid Gozman told us recently that with the Kremlin having fully discredited all other institutions of government, the Chamber deserved a chance. For the moment, it was "Putin's plaything," and its small group of independent members might find some leeway to achieve progress, albeit on less controversial issues. With that in mind, SPS had submitted military reform proposals to the Chamber in the belief that doing so could do no harm and might even result in some progress.

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COMMENT

¶15. (C) The Chamber is now out on the track and running, but its members may tire of their active schedule if they conclude it amounts to little more than a "talk shop." If that is a broader public perception, the Kremlin may also lose its enthusiasm for the body. Despite current claims that the Chamber's role complements that of the Duma and other bodies, it may come to be seen as redundant. Nonetheless, once created, institutions often prove hard to dismantle -- for instance, many observers believe the Presidential Representatives (PolPreds) have lost whatever purpose that innovation may once have had, but it is now hard to eliminate. Even if it shows little in the way of results, the Public Chamber might similarly linger on. It has already, however, become a political tool, as in its investigation and publicizing of the hazing scandal (where Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov was seen by some to be an implicit target of its activities), and could potentially be used to attack or support other political figures as well.

¶16. (C) We share the skepticism about the Chamber's long-term viability, recognizing that the Kremlin will be watching closely and will try to ensure that Chamber activities and views do not become "too independent." While a small group of independent civil society activists were included as Chamber members, most members hew to the Putin administration's line and are unlikely under normal circumstances to challenge Kremlin policy. Nonetheless, independent voices have already sometimes emerged from the Chamber, and its many structures offer new opportunities to seek partners for initiatives, particularly politically non-controversial ones. Velikhov, the Chamber's head, and other leading figures have expressed interest in working with us on projects, and we are actively pursuing those opportunities.

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